

# Live a Great Story

*Selected Writings From Creative Nonfiction (Fall  
2018)*

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# Live a Great Story

*Selected Writings From Creative Nonfiction (Fall 2018)*

DALE JACOBS



In the fall 2018 semester, I had a wonderful group of talented and hard-working writers in my Creative Nonfiction workshop. They were fearless in their writing and in the way they attacked the revision process, always striving to make their work better as they tackled a variety of difficult subjects

As they worked over the course of the semester, the writers featured here, along with their classmates, came together as a supportive writing community, helping each other to produce their best work possible. The four essays in this collection represent the spirit of that work. KC Santo on mental health. Andrew Whitmarsh on confronting death. Alana Natis on grief. Sarah Grenier on faith.

Enjoy the stellar work collected here. Live a great story.

– Dale Jacobs, University of Windsor, January 2019

# I. Some Touch of Madness

KC SANTO

So, I went crazy for a year. Mad, cracked, cuckoo, nutso, batshit, psycho, insane, fucked in the head.

In the months before I had found myself in a square-peg-round-hole situation and, wedged in deep, thought the answer was to cut off my corners, a painful and ridiculous solution that left me scarred and solved nothing.

Plagued by paranoia and crippling self-loathing, I hardly emerged from my bed let alone the house. Because I wasn't doing anything with my days, I seldom slept at night. With so many hours awake, there was more time to think and those thoughts sanded, and sawed, and hacked. Gripped in the teeth of depression distraction became essential, but I couldn't hold focus on books or television, so I turned to the one thing that had always brought me joy and listened to speculative fiction.

I promised myself that I could only do this if I got out of bed and accomplished something. Anything. So, I listened to podcasts of short fiction and interviews; I immersed myself in *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* and *Lightspeed*, mostly, but also *Escape Pod*, *Starship Sofa*, and *Clarkesworld* while I brushed my teeth, while I walked through my neighbourhood for hours, while I knit, while I vacuumed. And the more I listened, the more I found hope.

This genre of time travel, cylons, and electric sheep, of fantastical science and exploration, questions more than any other what it means to be human. It positions us against what is unhuman and imagines a better world by examining, subverting, and challenging our racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and cisgenderism. Feeling subhuman those long dark months, the hope in our ability to reach our fullest potential inspired me, slowly, painfully, to grow back those corners as if I was alien myself. Yet the more I listened

the more I realized ableism remains less challenged, particularly around mental health.

Like physical health, we all have mental health. I have learned we can struggle with it acutely, like breaking a bone, or we can strive to cope with a chronic condition, like diabetes. Most of us can engage in activities that will improve our mental health and all of us will have a universal life experience that will challenge it, such as grieving over the loss of a parent. With so many similarities between us, it amazes me how the entertainment industry, particularly stories told in the speculative fiction genre, continues to villainize mental health concerns.

Even my nine-year-old nephew, who is beautifully innocent and gorgeously wise beyond his years, has written a fantastic story about a protagonist being chased by 'the bad guys' in a world where all the humans are crazy, and the anthropomorphized animals are saviours. It goes a little something like this: our main character finds himself in another land, being chased by The Crazies (in his description over the phone I imagined *Reavers* from the *Whedonverse*, all slobbery and incoherent). On the run, our protagonist befriends an elephant, who offers a ride on his back. The pair arrive at a body of water and the elephant tries to ward off the attackers by spraying them with water from its trunk. It delays The Crazies for a while as they recover, stunned from the blast, but the chase resumes. The elephant and the boy then arrive at a pile of rocks. The elephant then tries to stop The Crazies by throwing rocks at them with his trunk. This also doesn't work. As they continue to flee, the two nearly run smack into a giant spider's web. The spider tells them to stand behind the web, visible to the antagonists. When The Crazies arrive and try to get at their prey, they get stuck in the web and the spider has a meal that will last her for days on end.

Please don't misunderstand, I love the story. This kid does try/fail cycles better than many adult writers. What I want to point out is the villainization of The Crazies, who have no other descriptors. The boy is the catalyst, the elephant is the helper, and the spider is

the genius. A nine-year-old already believes these experiences are mutually exclusive.

Sadly, there are far too many examples of villainized mental illnesses to explore each of them, but there are a few that stand out to me. My friends have heard about my frustrations with the world of Batman and all the villains *created* in Arkham Asylum. I can easily pull out my soapbox and delve into a diatribe about my theories on social capital and post-traumatic resilience in Harry Potter. Even Luke and Vader can be located at opposite ends of a dichotomy that conflates evil with illness and hero with health.

I understand the idea of being in battle with our health, having been pinned down by my own. Being ill has been scary, risky, and often reminds me of my ephemeral existence. On manic days I have done things I'm ashamed to admit, on depressive days I have slunk to new lows, and during both I've had complete disregard for my body. Many of us experience a mind/body split when it comes to our health or abilities, either physical or mental. This, too, becomes a universal experience, and thus so many speculative fiction fans identify with the struggles in these stories. But it hardly makes me, us, evil.

I imagine most of these stories want to question what it takes to break the human spirit, to understand our boundaries of resilience, and what it means to be no longer human once past these boundaries. If we lose enough of ourselves, our values, our mental health, the corners of our identities, do we become something lesser or greater than human? Despite my experience, I don't have an answer, but that's not important; it's the question itself that makes me so uncomfortable, particularly when it is mental health that frames it.

Mental illness is never addressed as such in the genre and it's assumed we understand through implication. Antisocial disorders are most often and detrimentally villainized, which I find hugely ironic in a genre with a fanbase known to misunderstand social cues. With villains like the Joker and Joffrey, it's impossible to imagine the lacking nuance and humanity behind these stock

characters. That's the point, to terrorize and entertain audiences with their lack of empathy. I can promise the terror of my mental illness never once entertained.

But mental illness is far more than a lack of empathy, erratic behavior, or hearing voices. It is also being overly concerned with the welfare of others or constantly, to our detriment, questioning our place of power and privilege in this world. It's about feeling we are less or more than others, less or more than human, in a way that has us interrogating ourselves rather than the problem we face. What I learned from that year of doubt and intolerable agony is that I can thrive with a mental illness, but it is messy, complicated, and often means an investment in building the skills of accurate critical reflection, self-worth, and community.

These skills are the values we should explore when examining mental illness in the speculative fiction genre. Not what happens when we 'lose our minds' and blow shit up, inwards or outwards, but rather the result when mental illness becomes a barrier we can survive, cope, or thrive with. Why haven't we figured out our resilience is exactly what it means to be human?

By no means am I suggesting there isn't work required in the other realms of anti-oppression, even in the worlds of speculative fiction. What I propose is we continue to use the framework of intersectionality in our storytelling and ensure that we recognize ableism when we see it. Would Luke have been a *better* Jedi without his prosthetic? Would Batman have been a different kind of hero without his post-traumatic stress disorder? Would Voldemort have tried to take over the world if he had the social capital in childhood to address his complex trauma?

Sure, we need character flaws and inner turmoil to create great fictional identities, but mental illness is not inherently a defect or weakness. It can be a challenge, most certainly, and a fascinating plot point or MacGuffin, but it is not the equivalent of evil.

The word 'crazy' has become synonymous with frantic, bizarre, ridiculous, erratic, scary, unrealistic, fantastical, violent, thrilling, intense, awesome, wild, absurd, outrageous, unacceptable,



fathomless, dangerous, and foolish. I want to engage in speculating that accurately portrays mental health and illness with the right words. I want to read about a character, back to the wall, being convinced to saw off her corners and overcoming the insurmountable. I want to continue to hope.

## 2. In Little Things

SARAH GRENIER

My thoughts flutter chaotically.  
They are sporadic, like lightning.  
I say something and then retract it;  
I add on to a thought before changing my mind completely.  
I triple-check myself constantly,  
    just to make sure that I haven't forgotten something,  
    or to understand where I went wrong,  
    or to make sure I couldn't have chosen a better  
    answer.

Ideas and suggestions flit to the surface, even if I don't want them to. Sometimes I just wish I could dim the buzzing in my head, just stop thinking so much for a moment, accept what comes my way as truth, quit making so many mental riddles for myself to solve. Hindsight is 20/20. I know this is true, so why does my mind continue to actively participate in the cliché?

I second-guess a lot; maybe I second-guess everything.

I've hesitated about God, too. A lot, actually. I haven't always been confident that He wasn't a figment of our collective imagination, a better option compared to the dismal alternative of there just being nothing else. Sometimes I try to link all the facts together and understand where the atheists are coming from, but then the theories fall short in some way. If you can't explain how exactly He's done it, it's pretty hard to try and explain Him away.

My grandma gave me a picture-Bible when I was really young. *The Rhyme Bible Storybook*, by L.J. Sattgast. All the words rhymed, and the pictures were vibrant and evocative. Evocative is definitely the best word for them. They were by no means beautiful, or perfect—the lines didn't always match up, and sometimes the colours bled out from behind their borders—but each picture had a presence on the page, emotions shown even in the painted skies.

The pictures had just as much of a message to share with the world as the words beside them.

It sat on the window-sill in my grandma's spare bedroom, and every time I stayed at her house I would pour over the pages. I absolutely loved that Bible, it was one of my favourite books—it still is. I look through it sometimes, just because. I have a lot of great memories connected with those pages, but I also have a lot of questions. It's not Sattgast's fault; the questions have been there for as long as I can remember. Am I the only one?

As a kid, Sunday School lessons taught me that Jesus called us his brothers and sisters; I could never understand where, if that were the case, we drew the line. I didn't understand how he was my sibling in most of the Bible, the only 'Son of God' in other sections. My questions frustrated people, especially those closest to me. *Sometimes you just have to have a little faith* this what I heard a lot growing up.

I spoke with every priest and parishoner I felt comfortable with about my concerns with the Trinity, with God and Jesus, and how everything all fit together. I talked to quite a few people about it, and every time I walked away disappointed; my confusion had been deflected, not resolved.

I took a psych course last year, in an attempt to understand the inner workings of my mind a little better, maybe figure out where faith fit in my head, but all it confirmed for me was that humanity has no idea what's going on; a lot of guesses and theories, a lot of gray-areas, a lot of 'blanks filled in'.

Except.

Maybe some of those filled-in spaces were never blank. We spent the semester talking about risks and rewards, punishments and benefits, fear and coping mechanisms. We talked about the different reasons a person might agree to do something, be it for themselves or others or perhaps even inadvertently. We talked about classical and operant conditioning, about our behaviors and the nerve-paths that spark throughout our bodies. We even talked about humanity's collective fear of death, and the 'coping' techniques our mind has

developed to deal with the concept of mortality—which is what God probably is, after all.

I learned in class that God is ‘unfalsifiable’, and then I learned that was a bad thing. Since He can’t be defined or tested through any physical means, God has been declared at best, a psuedo-science. A baby thrown out with the bathwater.

We’ve tried dissecting him, but the pieces wouldn’t fit back together again; we’ve tried blowing him up, but He always manages to get away at the very last second; we’ve tried to fit Him into our world, but He just won’t squish. After being proven wrong time and time again, the only conclusion our species could come up with was that the tests were broken, therefore the results inconclusive. And there you have it. I learned a lot, got a pretty good mark, yet walked away feeling like none of it was what I went in there wanting to find out.

I’ve asked the same questions to a hundred different people looking for a pattern. I’ve asked the same questions to the same people, over and over, to see if the answer stayed the same. I have questioned the very idea of God more than once, more than a thousand times, more than I can count. I have asked everyone who would stop and listen long enough about their opinion on God, and their answers were good; they all struck a chord—or discord, so to speak—in me.

I have tried to reason it out so many times that my thoughts on the topic are like well-worn pathways, the conclusions all ending up at about the same place. I have asked God to send down some valid proof on more than one occassion of His existence and what I was supposed to do with the information. I don’t ask those kinds of questions anymore; fortunately, they aren’t there for me to ask.

For me, God is right up there with calculus and quantum physics in terms of my ability to interpret and comprehend.

But, I’m starting to find the answers...

I think.

Some of them make me laugh, because I realize they were always there for me to find.

God's right out in the open, He isn't hiding anywhere. I see Him in the face of the woman who smiles at me as I walk past her, in the way the Detroit river changes colour every day; every day another shade of blue or grey or green. I see God in the ant pile I step over on my way to class, and in the 'thank you' an elderly man gives me, when I hold the door open for Him. I think the problem before was that I was overthinking God, trying to mash everything I thought I knew into something I could understand—into something I could have faith in.

The other answers I've stumbled upon make me laugh because I'm twenty-two years old and have only now found them. How can I have walked through life in such a small bubble, and for so long?

I didn't know what an *Imam* was until last year; I didn't know that a man reciting prayer could make a whole building stop breathing simultaneously. Why did I have to move three hours away from home before I heard the word "Islam"?

I'd never even seen a copy of the Qur'an yet; I didn't understand that the pages would become blurry when I read some parts, the words resonating in every limb, every sense and nerve. The first copy I ever owned was cream-coloured with a beige frame around skinny black letters. It was over six hundred pages, filled to the brim with footnotes explaining all sorts of things, most of which I was proud to say I already knew (thanks, Sattgast). There were no pictures, but each page had the arabic verses alongside the english translation. The letters wove together into hemistiches of information that I would dog-ear, saving for later.

When I finished the last *surah* I knew I had just finished reading something life-changing. It wasn't something to put away on a shelf; it was something I had to embrace, something I had to share. That copy was the one that I gave to mom, when I was finally ready. She wasn't.

I looked out at the Detroit river, just a shade darker than the air. The sky pressed down on the ripples of water, stilling their motion; the next second, steel-gray water churned itself free, breaking into the sky above. They fused together, if you stood there long enough.

Seconds collected into minutes and still, my knuckles clung hard to the pale green railing. I was looking at an answer; it was right here, on the other side of the rusting metal, yet I had no idea how to put it into words. I felt this way all the time—like my senses weren't properly connected; my eyes saw something my tongue couldn't translate, or I'd smell something I couldn't visualize, for example.

A lump grew in my throat, refusing to go away no matter how many times I swallowed. I felt the cold, bumpy steel beneath my fingers.

Faith is something I have a really hard time wrapping my head around—probably because it's not something that's inside my head. It's there when I see sun spattered sidewalks beneath marbling maples, and when I hear the whisp of waves stealing moss off the tops of those unsteady stones. It's in the thick air I take on the last warm day of the year, the feeling of the icy breeze off the water, painting my cheeks, no doubt hinting at tomorrow.

I was looking for faith inside books and webpages, inside my family and friends, but you can't gain it that way. You can't be told to have faith, you need to understand it in your own way—and standing here looking out at the Detroit river, the clouds finally clamouring into my view, I was finally understanding what faith felt like.

I turned my attention to the pathway, to the people. I didn't really care about where they might be going, or how they were dressed, or what they looked like. I was curious about what they were thinking. I wonder if they wonder about God, they way I do—as often as I do. Am I the only out here constantly asking myself these questions? I see headphones blinding noise and eyes trained on cellphone screens. 2018 doesn't seem to want to look up, so what is it looking at? What's got everyone's attention—what's *more important*?

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, but God isn't exactly an area where there's much room for this type of post-meditation; by the time we have the answers we think we want, the concept of 'hindsight' no longer applies.

Except:

The answers are in everything, everyone, everywhere. They are right in front of us, the problem is decoding them, understanding them. I think the problem is a lot of us don't ask the right questions. To be honest, I think most of us are okay with not asking any questions at all.

It's there, though.

Stop.

Close your eyes, take a breath.

Don't you feel it too?

# 3. Getting to Know Death

ANDREW WHITMARSH

*My Mom died and all I got was this free churro.*

– BoJack Horseman, BoJack Horseman Season 5 Episode 6 “Free Churro”

I’ve never been to *the* funeral.

The one that actually feels like a funeral to you. Not the kind where you feel like the awkward outsider looking in, thinking *well somebody died, that sucks* as your family members grieves. I’m talking about the kind where you’re just standing there and thinking *fuck, what do I do now*.

Sure, I’ve been to funerals. Two, in fact. One was for my paternal grandfather, who I only met a few times in my life. I can barely remember it. The other was for one of my many great-uncles, who I also only met once or twice.

The clearest memory I have from that day is my Grandma sobbing over the body at her brothers wake, screaming out his name. She was the only one at the funeral who acted like that: an awkward, ugly, fumbling display of intense grief. It didn’t last long because of one of her other brothers got up to lead her away, but that image of grief stuck with me.

I hope *the* funeral never comes. I know someday it will.

It’s like, up until now, death has somehow forgotten me. But not my family.

Like my cousin Paul, who I’ve always called an uncle, who lost his parents in the span of a week. His mom, to natural causes, and his dad, who hung himself a week later.

Just last month, I got a text from my mom telling me one of my uncle’s own cousins had hung herself in the garage. Just like his dad.

I read the text as I was brushing my teeth, getting ready for



school. By the time the toothpaste was swirling down the drain, plenty of other worries had overcome the momentary sadness I felt for this person I had never met.

Now this is depressing shit, but I feel suddenly pressed to write about it for two reasons.

One is that I've been spending a deal of time writing a piece on my Dad and his father, which is a story both painfully sad and true – something I've never really experienced. The other reason however, is not a true story. It's a television show.

The opening epigraph of this piece comes from the recent season of *BoJack Horseman*. Specifically, "Free Churro," where BoJack gives a monologue about getting over the death of his emotionally abusive mother at her funeral. For nearly twenty minutes the camera remains locked on BoJack as we watch him sort through his mess of a relationship.

By the end, death becomes a joke as he focuses on the fact he got a free churro for telling a cashier his mom died. Then there's the final punchline of the reveal that BoJack is at the wrong funeral; that he just cut himself open for all to see and that it doesn't even matter. It's a television show, sure, but shit like that cuts deep.

But, it's no less meaningful just because it isn't real. And I couldn't help but think of my own Dad as being in the same position of BoJack at his father's funeral.

BoJack is, admittedly, a terrible person; a self-loathing, wallowing, and self-destructive drunk. He's nothing like my dad, and not just because my Dad isn't an anthropomorphic horse. And my Grandfather wasn't abusive; he was difficult, distant, and hardly there, but he was, according to my Dad, a good man who tried. He was just a little broken inside.

Still, his death has always unresolvedly hung heavy over my Dad. He's never really talked about it, but as a child, you notice these things about your parents. Like just how messy those first few days after my Grandfather's death were for my Dad. Still, at the funeral, he managed to say a few words despite his uncertain grief.

I wish I could remember what those words were. I realize my Dad

probably wishes he could forget. Then I got to thinking how close my own Dad came to dying. And then I started thinking on how I'd never really thought about how close he came to death.

It was January 15th, 2015, and my mom was driving me and my brother to school. Since it was my last year in high school, I was able to have the luxury of spares, which I had first class of each semester. This meant I could hitch a ride when my brother got dropped off at his school.

Just as we were pulling up, my Mom got a call. Something had happened.

My Dad had a fall, and she had to go: this was all the information I was given before I was dropped off. Imagine being dropped off at school and, just as you're getting out of the car, you find that your Dad has had an accident. You know nothing about this accident; it could be serious, it could be nothing. All you know is that your mother looked pretty serious and suddenly you're stranded at school with the knowledge that your Dad might be hurt or dying or dead.

It wasn't fun.

I walked to class in a daze, noticing that there was a shattered window. In class, I learned from my friend Kees that it had somehow been punched out by another student and Kees had seen it happen. That the student stormed out of class, yelled some expletives, and sent his fist flying through the glass.

The rest of the day was a blur until my Uncle Paul picked up my brother and me from school to take us to the hospital. He filled us in on the details: that my Dad had been whipped into the ground by a poorly secured lift.

The injuries were not life threatening, but no less serious. For all intents and purposes, he was a broken man. Every word, every movement, was soft and slow, as if he was on the verge of falling apart. He couldn't even breathe properly without a chest tube.

It would take a week not only for that chest tube to be removed, but also for him to take a few measly, painful steps. It would take six

months until he could move without a walker, and another six until he could walk without a cane.

If he had been a foot higher, or fallen at a different angle and landed on his head, he could've died at forty-three. He could've died due to the negligence of whoever set up that lift.

As it happens, that student ended up in the emergency ward right beside him, yelling and cursing at nothing in particular. By the time I arrived, the boy was already gone. One of the first things my Dad did though was tell me about him as he tried not to laugh.

My Dad had almost died. And he was laughing.

It seems a cliché to write about death. What is every teenager and young adult, after all, if not death-obsessed. And I'm sure many writers can relate to the idea of angst-ridden death poetry in their teen years.

I'm not writing about death in that way though. At least I don't think I am. I like to think I'm reflecting on the absurdity of life, near-death, and death, perhaps to get closer to some approximation of how much of a tangled mess these things are.

After all, I was inspired to write this essay by watching a show about a depressed, alcoholic horse who was a famous actor in the nineties – that must mean something. Or I at least hope it does so I can convince myself I'm somehow offering some new perspective.

In order to do that though, I need to explore my own experiences with death, minimal as they may be. So here goes:

To my knowledge, I've had three near misses with death. When I was a baby, I was hospitalized with a very serious bout of pneumonia. I don't really remember this. I wasn't even aware it happened until my mother mentioned it offhandedly one day years ago.

The second, I was a kid on the verge of my teenage years: eleven or twelve or so. I had stayed the night at my cousins in Dresden and my parents just arrived to pick me up. Having spent most of the day in the basement, I wasn't aware of just how black the clouds were and how windy it was when I left the house.

The instant I got in the van, the wind picked up without warning and I can still vividly remember the van actually tilting before my mom got in the passenger side. Being a child still, I immediately began to beg my parents to stay and wait it out. Despite my protests, we continued to drive anyway and as we turned the corner moments later, we were greeted by a rather large fallen tree down the road a bit, right at a stop sign. Had we left even a minute or two earlier, that tree could have landed right on top of our van without warning, then who knows what could've happened.

When the subject of this event comes up now, the thing that my parents always circle back around to is my screaming. And they laugh about it as if it were just some childish overreaction. They laugh about as if the winds weren't strong enough to make a fucking tree fall on the road.

The third, and final, is rather recent: just last year in fact. I had an evening class at the University and I was driving home to my Aunt's, with whom I was staying for that school year. As per norm when I was driving, I was blasting an album of some kind – I don't remember what it was.

My route home involved taking Pillette all the way down to Grand Blvd, where my Aunt lives. As I approached the intersection with Tecumseh, the light barely turned red seconds before I would've felt safe crossing. Seconds later, an ambulance sped past, not even slowing down and then the realization hit me: I almost fucking died.

Whether it was due to my music, or the fact that its sirens weren't on (even as it sped past, I didn't hear it), I had no awareness of that ambulance which didn't even slow down for safety. At the speed it was going, I almost certainly would have suffered great, if not potentially fatal, injuries.

My life was saved by the happenstance of the light turning red and, had I walked slightly faster to my car on campus, or drove just a nudge faster, that ambulance would've hit me. As it stands, at the time of my writing this, this is the only time the thought of my death had ever seriously crossed my mind.

You'd think that this would've lead to some sort of life epiphany or

at very least a simple realization that maybe I shouldn't blast music while driving at night in a city. It didn't.

I sat there for about a minute after, waiting for the light to turn green. When it did, I drove on without missing a beat and, by the time I was home, the event was already pushed to the back of my mind. I had almost died and it seemed, at the time, little more than some inconvenient thought.

I stop and think about that moment sometimes. I'll be walking up the stairs or washing the dishes or some other mundane activity and I'll suddenly feel the need to freeze in thought in order to fully understand, once again, that I almost died that day. Admittedly, I probably look ridiculous in these moments, as if I've been afflicted by a sudden, benign seizure.

Then, I start doing whatever I was doing again, go on with my life, and forget about my contemplation until the next time it strikes me.

Writing about death is as serious as it is a joke.

It's a thin line between offering insights on death and cliché wallowing's. It's one thing to reflect on death, it's another to pretend you have something new to offer on the subject.

*BoJack Horseman* could have chosen to have BoJack just give a painful, honest eulogy on his mother's death at her funeral – that would have been powerful enough on its own. But it's been seen before, and it'll be seen again.

Instead, he pours his feelings out over the wrong casket and to complete strangers. It's not just a punchline, it's a snot-filled snort right in the face of how we approach death; a complete disregard of what's proper.

I'm reminded of a song by Mount Eerie, a solo project headed by Phil Elverum. After the loss of his wife to cancer, Elverum did what some might consider tacky: he released two albums entirely about his grieving process.

The result was two collections of a series of loose, grieving thoughts strung together by exceptionally bare instrumental work. In the opener "Real Death," off the first of these two albums, *A Crow*

*Looked at Me*, Elverum wastes no time in confronting the irony of what he's doing:

"Death is real/ someone's there and then they're not/ and it's not for singing about/ it's not for making into art/ when real death enters the house/ all poetry is dumb"

Of course, he is singing about death, even if he says it's not proper. Of course, *A Crow Looked at Me* is art; it's a cohesive album strung together by the theme of his grief for his wife. Of course, poetry is struck dumb in the face of real death, but that doesn't stop Elverum from using Joanne Kyger's "Night Palace" as the cover for the album.

Of course, death is real. And every reaction to it is as equal as any other.

I might not understand what it means to face real loss yet, but I'm no stranger to death. The stunned daze I was in as that ambulance sped past isn't nothing. The retrospective acknowledgement of how that tree may have landed on our van isn't reaching. The uncertain feelings I felt seeing my Dad in that hospital bed aren't invalid. Even the apathy I felt at my Great-Uncle's funeral or upon learning about that woman's suicide isn't some callous disregard of death.

I know death: it's sad, bitter, ironic, messy, unfair, and a joke all in one. I just haven't gotten to know it personally yet.

## 4. Where Grief Lives

ALANA NATIS

Grief, although often associated with death, lives on forever. It lives on in us, you, me, the ones left behind. But where exactly does grief live in the body? The head? Maybe. The heart? Surely.

My grief sits on the left side of the mid-back, a little ways below the shoulder blade. I came to know this while lying face down on a massage table. I'd had a Groupon for a "holistic massage," claiming to offer a more well-rounded healing and relaxation experience. And so, as the masseuse worked, she asked me about my life—my family, my job—pointing out on my body where my stresses took their toll. The left shoulder carries family stress, she told me, while the right shoulder carries work stress. And grief lives in your back.

"This is your grief for your dad." *Poke.* "Right here." *Poke, poke.*

I'd noticed the pain before, but not necessarily the knot. It sat way below the surface, tucked in and hidden. Only when she gently prodded the area, rolling unevenly over it, did I notice the depth of its roots. It was rigid and hard, and her hands worked meticulously, pressing and kneading the ball of tension as it slipped this-way-and-that under her pressure. It felt as if it was running away.

Maybe it's my left side because I'm grieving for something that's gone, that has left. Maybe it's my back because all I want is for him to come back.

I always found it interesting that the word for 'left' in Latin is 'sinister,' but I guess that makes sense. If left is sinister and grief is hell, then it must be sitting in the right spot.

I left feeling open from that massage, physically and mentally. I was quite intrigued by some of the things the masseuse said, mostly because I hadn't expected a deep conversation. I noticed a release in both my muscles and my mind as her words sunk into my flesh.

I doubt this tension will ever disappear completely, but that's okay. Now, every time I feel a tightness a little below my left

shoulder blade, every time I lean just slightly to the right, causing an extension and a subsequent stream of pops and cracks in my left side, every time I poke at that knot, I understanding why and how it can be so stubborn, and I think of him.

And even though he's gone, and even though it's grief, it's nice to be reminded of him, even if it hurts.